

# *A Practical Guide to* **Coping With** **Reference** **Anxiety Disorder**

**It happens to the best of us.** It affects everyone who interacts with a search engine to varying degrees from Average Sally Searcher to John Hardcore, research librarian. Realize and remember that it's completely natural and nothing to be ashamed of. Your friends and colleagues have faced it as well; they just don't talk about it. In fact, it's probably the information profession's least discussed disorder.

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I'm speaking of Reference Anxiety Disorder, or RAD, the feeling an information specialist experiences when he/she can't find the information they're seeking. It's often brought about by an (incorrect) assumption that, with so much information available in the world, the information the searcher is looking for *must exist somewhere*. (After all, that's why they call it *re*-search, right?) The client's request isn't really *that* far-fetched. Considering that studies have been published on the pressure produced when penguins poop (yes, this is a real study by Victor Benno Meyer-Rochow of International University, Bremen, and Jozsef Gal of Lorand Eotvos University, Hungary), surely the reasonable-sounding question you just received from a client *must* have been asked and answered already.

You are the information professional after all, the *expert* searcher, the *experienced* librarian, the ultimate information broker. People come to *you* because Google couldn't cut it. Not only do you want to help, but you want to help legitimize the profession by showing the client you can find *anything*.

When the searcher *can't* uncover the answer, feelings of guilt, shame, and doubt in his or her professional worth can grow acute, especially in newly minted information professionals.



## But Am I Contagious?

***If you can answer "yes" to any of these symptoms, you might have RAD:***

- I have feelings of guilt and sadness at not finding the "right" information.
- I get depressed or feel ashamed of myself as a librarian when I have to tell the client a search came up dry.
- I think that someone must have written a white paper on even the most obscure topics.
- I think my colleagues are laughing at me when I can't find anything. They always find everything they're looking for.
- I can stop searching any time. But only after checking one ... more ... source ...
- I try to hide my searching habits because I know my co-workers/boss/spouse/friends wouldn't approve.
- My colleagues have gone to happy hour, and I'm still searching.
- The client has said it's OK to stop searching ... but I think he's wrong.



The reality is, even in today's information-rich world, certain information just doesn't always exist (or at least not in a published and/or searchable format) and certain issues have never been formally examined. Or maybe the information exists, but the cost to access it is prohibitively high. While it may be exactly what you need, that six-page study you found has a price tag of \$1,500. With budgets taking serious hits over the last few years, the chance of funding these types of studies is probably slim.

All that being said, there is still something inherent in librarians and information professionals that drives us to keep hunting. However, just as with Average Sally Searcher, the librarian who looks too long can waste time and money, not to mention the opportunity costs of not moving onto the next project that *can* produce more solid results. In these ways, RAD can have very real negative effects on your bottom line and reputation. For librarians in instructional roles, teaching students when to stop is a part of building good information literacy skills for the same reasons.

Know when to say "when." Recognize when to stop a search. Otherwise, you may waste a lot of time (that could be spent more productively) chasing unicorns. At some point, you need to tell the client that the information simply isn't available. (Notice the subtle but important difference between "isn't available" and "doesn't exist.") But where or when can you realize you've reached that point? Here are several indicators ...

### The Same Thing Over, and Over, and Over Again

Perhaps the most important sign that you need to stop is that you continue to find similar, but not completely relevant, resources, no matter what search terms or search strategy you deploy. If you've burned through your thesaurus and tried the search across multiple fields in multiple configurations, and the search results are roughly the same, you've probably mined that particular resource to its end. Similarly, if you've moved to another search platform (a different database, a different search engine, a new research organization, etc.) and you're getting content that is slightly different but generally the same and just as irrelevant as the previous search platform, there is a high probability that you have found all you're going to find on the topic.

### The Question Is Questionable

The mantra of the librarian is either, "There are no stupid questions" or, "The only stupid question is an unasked



question.” Nevertheless, some questions carry a higher impact than others. Maybe the information requested is merely “fun” or “nice to have.” The question you took for a new employee doing a scavenger hunt as part of her orientation on a slow Friday afternoon may need to be trumped by the rush request from a senior executive.

Or maybe the person is trying to find information for a project that may be dead on arrival. A colleague of mine once received a question asking if she could find some information relating to placing video game consoles in break areas to increase employee productivity by making breaks more enjoyable and mentally refreshing. While certainly an interesting question, we knew (for reasons related to copyright and our company’s culture) that this initiative probably didn’t have wings. My colleague gave it her full effort, but wisely didn’t spend an *overabundance* of time tracking this information down when it became apparent not much existed.

This stop trigger, of course, requires the searcher to carefully evaluate the question in the context of who was asking and why. But whatever the case, if you have 15 other questions in your queue and you’re not finding a lot of information on your current request, start weighing the impact of the current question against the others.

### **The Client Wants to Stop**

Sometimes the requestors themselves can be great regulators on the amount of searching you do. Maybe they found what they needed already. (If so, always ask where and how.) Maybe the project for which they needed the information was canceled or went in a different direction. Maybe they decided the information wasn’t as important as originally thought. Whatever the reason, there are times when the individual or group requesting the information simply calls off the hunt.

While this is rarely intended maliciously on the part of the requestor, it can generate some of the worst feelings associated with RAD in the searcher. The searcher isn’t allowed to verify that the information does or does not exist, and, hence, feels like he or she has failed to prove his or her worth.

### **The Funding and/or Time Runs Out**

One of the great questions for astronomers, physicists, philosophers, and theologians is whether time and space are infinite or finite. Rarely do searchers need to ponder the question. We live in the finite.

For searchers working on a charge-back basis of some kind, this can set a definite halt to searches. Budgets (especially if you are employing pay-per-use sources) and time are always finite. If you run up against deadlines or if funding runs out, much to the searcher’s angst, the search *must* come to a very abrupt end. The tireless searcher has done what he or she can within the brutal parameters of reality. As harsh as it seems, this can actually be helpful in resisting the normal tendency to search until you find the “perfect” item.

### **The Wisdom of Crowds Says It’s Time to Stop**

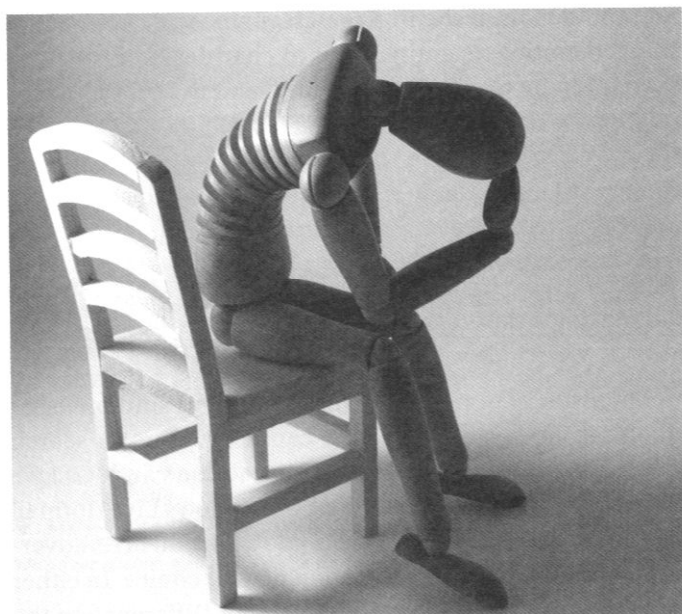
Sometimes, a clear indicator of when to say when is that you’re all alone. You’ve bounced the question off your colleagues. You’ve consulted all the professional listservs to which you belong (and several that you don’t). You’ve crowd-sourced the question via Twitter and LinkedIn. No one can suggest new terms, resources, or search strategies that you haven’t already tried. Searching past this point makes you the information profession’s equivalent of the alcoholic who hides a bottle of whiskey in the back of the toilet.

### **The Answer Exists ... Kinda ... But It’ll Cost Ya’**

This might be one of the most common causes of RAD. You’ve found the *perfect* item. It’s *exactly* what the client wants, but the data is available from only one source. The problem is it costs \$1,000, is only six-pages long, and is not available through any of the normal resources to which you subscribe. Sure, you might be able to pull together some of the resources the study’s creators used to fuel their work. Unfortunately, at that point, the search often runs into one of the other stop triggers already discussed and you slink back to the office to brood about what you could do if you could just get the study’s works cited page.

The flip side of this is a high cost in time. Sometimes you know you’ve seen a piece of information for free, be it online or in hard copy, but now it’s completely eluding you. The only version you can find now costs \$10. Still you know it’s available for free ... somewhere. The keen searcher must be careful not to spend so much time searching for the piece that he may as well have just spent the \$10 and saved \$30 worth of time. And as for those sad souls who assume that everything is somewhere on the web for free and it’s their job to find all of it — well, need we say more?

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### **Is There a Cure?**

While there is no cure for Reference Anxiety Disorder, you *can* manage the feelings and symptoms.

Remember that while you may not have found exactly what the client was looking for, you probably found *something*. That *something* may have been pretty close to the original goal. It's rare that professional searchers come back completely empty-handed. And in any case, you, the valiant yet guilt-ridden searcher, probably found a lot more than the client would have found on his or her own.

In the end, it's all about detachment and letting go. Like the stages of grief, eventually the valiant searcher comes to acceptance. And if that doesn't work, there is always the next project waiting in the queue. ♦

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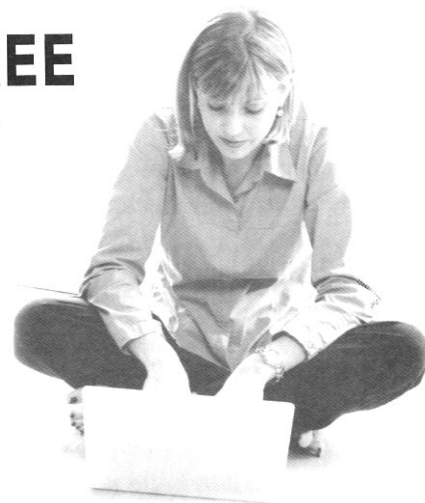
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